One of the strengths of redescription is its capacity to alter the perspective, to so radically move the line of vision that we are shocked into changing our view. This is what Rorty has in mind when he speaks of learning about institutional cruelty from Nineteen Eighty-Four or the cruelty inherent in the pursuit of private bliss from Lolita. There is no hint in this of a cognitive free for all. For a redescription to be liberating there must at least be some description that has held us captive, some way of looking at moral experience from whose grip we are thankful to be released. But the power of redescription is, like all power, vulnerable to abuse. It is akin to metaphor in being able both to open our eyes to the awareness of possibilities and to close them. As Bambrough comments of liberating descriptions, ‘whatever can achieve this shift will also be capable of misleading us; the more useful, the less life-like, and the less life-like the more dangerous to the just apprehension of one who is no longer or not yet suffering from the passive or distorted vision that it is calculated or inspired to rectify.’

When the redescriptions at stake stem from the contrasting vocabularies of ethics and the novel, what frees and what obscures become complex questions. We have not ignored the commonly held view that ethics holds the promise of a critical attitude to life. Throughout its history ethics has been preoccupied with the search for a criterion of right conduct. In both its Kantian and utilitarian forms moral philosophy has aimed at the construction of a standard against which action can be measured. So in politics, for example, ethics looks for a norm of justice according to which actual institutional arrangements can be judged. The focus, in other words, is action and how it can be assessed.
This picture of moral philosophy as action guiding goes very deep. Without the possibility of criticism ethics is blunted, its reason for existence weakened. But one sure consequence of thinking of ethics as practical is the underlining of its distance from the novel. For it is the essence of the practical attitude to want to make its criticism effective in the world. The practical attitude expects intransigence and knows how to deal with it. The risks it encounters are those of trespass, and the gains it hopes for are those of mutual benefit and tangible reward. The practical attitude turns on reciprocity and the achievement of ends. It positively demands replies to its criticisms and it thrives on debate. A practical ethics is not averse to literary criticism so long as it does not harbour ambitions beyond its means. It welcomes estimations of the novel that proceed on the novel’s terms alone because they make no presumption regarding practice and they do not attempt to pass themselves off as life guiding when they are not. Critical scrutiny of the novel’s constructed world will attend to the depth of its descriptions, the sincerity of its tone of voice or the strength and persuasiveness of its narrative. However, when the novel is read as a text in practical ethics it is practical criticism that is the first fatality.

As readers, we commonly need little persuasion to laugh with Pickwick or to cry tears of pity at the fate of Antigone. We find ourselves completely involved, almost at the mercy of the writer’s descriptions. The reader asks what she would have done if she had been Mrs Bardell faced by Pickwick’s unintended offer of marriage. Would she have brought an action for breach of promise? Dickens makes us understand why a woman like Mrs Bardell would act as she did. He makes us realise, too, how Pickwick’s discomfort can be made to appear funny. But nothing in the novel enables the reader to say ‘he’s not the man for me’ or ‘I’ll make him pay’ or ‘I must make it easy for him since he didn’t mean what he said’, as she might in life. Should moral philosophers stop behaving like readers, however sophisticated their grasp of the appropriate response to a work of art? Then, at least, they could regain the conventional ethical concentration on life by addressing the moral problems found in life, such as boundary issues between life and death in medical ethics or slippery slope questions in political morality. In these areas, ethical criticism can matter. It aims to make a difference to the decisions individuals reach, to the way they behave. Or should moral philosophers step aside from ethics as a source of practical criticism? For then, at least from the perspective of life, both philosophy and art can be pictured as strategies of avoidance,